SOME WORDS ON THIEF TALK.

IN the earliest notice we have of the language of the English thief, it is called "Pedler's French," or "Canting." Its first appearance as "Flash" may be seen in "The Regulator, or a discovery of the Theeves, Thief-Takers, and Locks, *alias* Receivers of Stolen Goods in and about the City of London," 1718. Both of these terms are now used.

Cant is from the Latin *cantare*, which signifies to enchant as well as to sing, and so the original thief may have been a singer, who stole the brains of his victims — not always the least valuable part of human possessions — through their ears.

In "A Caveat or Warening For commen Cursetors vulgarely called vagabones," set forth by Thomas Harman, 1567, to "cante" is defined "to speake."

In "Il Modo novo da intendere la lingua Zerga cioé parlar furbesca," 1549, to talk is expressed by *cantare*, and so the first English as well as Italian rogue must have been a talker ; this much, at least, would seem sure.

Thieving without secrecy could hardly exist. Thief talk was invented to secure this. As another means to the same end, changes in its words are frequently made. Karl Weinen, one of the Prussian Criminal Commissioners, tells us in a little book entitled "Aus dem Berliner Verbrecherleben," published during the present year, that a new vocabulary is constantly appearing in Berlin. The same testimony is borne respecting thief talk in Suabia, which Schäffer, in his "Abrisz des Jauner und Bettelwesens in Schwaben," further declares to be more liable to change than other tongues.

The first vocabulary of the language of thieves that appeared in Europe was written in German, and printed about the year 1504. It bears the title "Liber Vagatorum. Der betlerorden." The professional beggar was then a thief, and is frequently such at the present day.

Copies of this first edition of the "Liber Vagatorum" are rare, and often not to be found even in some of the largest libraries of Europe.

In the second edition of this work (1528), which must be even more rare, since Avé Lallemont ("Das Deutsche Gaunerthum") informs us that only three copies are known : the editor, no less a person than Martin Luther, gives the honor of having invented thief talk to the Jews. How does the reformer prove this? Out of their vocabulary. This, he declares, contains many Hebrew-words. Now, the list he gives us, out of two hundred and sixteen words and phrases, we find only sixteen which, by any reasonable stretch of the imagi-

nation, can be construed as Hebrew, — hardly enough, it seems to us, to establish this claim.

Henri Estienne, in his "Traité de la conformité du langage François avec le Grec," s. l. et a., p. 136, tells us that the largest part of *jergon* or thief talk was evidently taken from the Greek. How is this shown? By only three words, all, we must presume, which he was able to give, namely: *Arti* from ἄρτος; *cri* from κρέας; *piot* from πότος; and so the Greek claim looks even worse than that made for the Jew.

"To the Gipsies, beggars, and thieves," says the compiler of the "Slang Dictionary, Etymological, Historical, and Anecdotal," 1873, "we are in a great measure indebted for the Cant language." How far is this true? The earliest extended notice we have of the Gipsies, or "Egyptians," as they called themselves, may be seen in Andrew Borde's "Fyrste Boke of the Introduction of Knowledge," issued, it is said, in 1527. But a careful examination of Borde's Egyptian goes to show that it is more Turkish Romany than English Gipsy; and another more important fact may be added: it does not contain a single word of English Cant.

Cant is not only not Gipsy at the present time, but never has been such. In the first English thief lexicon, "Harman's Caveat," we find but one solitary Gipsy word. In the first American glossary, that of Tufts, in his "Life and Adventures," written 1793–98, we have none. In the first French Canting vocabulary, entitled "Le Jargon ou langage d'Argot reformé," 1634, none. In the first Italian, "Il Modo novo da intendere la lingua Zerga," 1549, none. In the first German, "Liber Vagatorum," 1534, none; and in the first Spanish, "Romances de Germania," 1609, not more than a dozen out of a vocabulary of nearly twelve hundred words.

Slang and Cant words peculiar to each country, as we are told by Smart in his "Dialect of the Egyptian Gipsies," have become incorporated in the different Gipsy dialects, sometimes probably through a want of discrimination on the part of the reporter, who, hearing them used, has confounded them with the genuine Gipsy tongue. . . . "That's not a *tatscho lay*" is a frequent Gipsy comment on hearing a Canting phrase imported into conversation which is being professedly carried on in their own proper dialect. Cant words are intermingled with Gipsy in the same way, and on exactly the same principle, as ordinary or provincial English, but to nothing like the same extent. Possibly some words of this class may have inadvertently found their way into our vocabulary; but if so, they do not occur in Hotten's "Slang Dictionary" (London, 1864), and we leave them to be relegated to their proper place by those who may detect their real character (see Introduction, p. xxii.). And so it would seem that, so

far from Cant being in a great measure indebted to Gipsy, Gipsy is indebted to Cant.

The fact is, rogue talk is old talk, generally made up from old words of every country, and we owe most of these neither to the Gipsy, Greek, nor Jew. This appears not only in the *Cant* of England, but also in the *Argot* of France, the *Germania* of Spain, the *Kjeltringelatin* of Denmark, the *Fantesprog* of Sweden, the *Geiler* talk of Holland, the *Kochem-Loschen* of Germany, — all of which teem with archaisms. Even the *Ramasee* can be assigned to none of the existing languages of India.

This will explain how it is that some thief talk is largely Hebrew, especially that in use along the boundary lines between Germany and Poland, where the Jew swarms, or once did swarm. And this, too, well explains why the thief of that part of Italy once known as Magna Grecia still mingles classic Greek and old Phœnician words with his Italian, and why this Phœnician is still heard on the streets of Malta in the *lingua punica* of to-day.

This is the history of all tongues ; the more degraded does not often appropriate the language of the more cultivated, while the latter borrows from the former without stint or measure ; and our English is no exception to this rule. Indeed, much of our existing slang was once Cant, and one is oftentimes puzzled to distinguish the one from the other ; only it should be borne in mind that, while Cant frequently arrives at being Slang, Slang seldom if ever becomes Cant. Even our *O. K.* seems to be an invention of American thieves ; and stranger still, *Tye*, a neck-cloth, first appears in " The Names of the Flash Words now in vogue among thieves," to be found in " The Regulator, by a prisoner in Newgate," London, 1718.

The language of thieves does not generally present a figurative character in different and widely separated countries, as Barrow (" The Zincali," vol. ii. p. 132) states it does. Some thief talk, to be sure, — that of Spain, for example, — teems with figurative expressions ; others have very little or none. Very little metaphor appears in the Cant of Teutonic countries ; where Neo-Latin languages are spoken it abounds. Have climatic influences anything to do with this ? And here is another curious fact. New York Cant abounds in abbreviations, while the *Germania* of Spain, the *Calao* of Portugal, and all German thief talk, have none at all. Can climate explain this, too ?

In these days of higher education, taste for languages would seem to be especially developed among thieves, and here the American would appear to lead. *Venite* (come), Italian ; *palaver* (talk), Portuguese ; *sans* (without), French ; *egrotat* (he is sick), Latin ; *virtue ater* (virtue), English, (*ater,* without) Greek ; *cocum* (sly), Lussnekodesch ;

schofel (paltry), vulgar German ; *quemar* (burn), Spanish ; *shero* (head), Gipsy ; *clink* (*klinken*, to clench), Dutch, — with many more that we could name, are to be found in New York thief talk to-day.

But in spite of foreign education, the American uses much more Old English than his English *confrère*, and a reason may readily be assigned. The American took most of his words from the oldest English thief vocabularies, or supplied his wants with English provincialisms, which, for reasons that are obvious, the Englishman could not use. So the dialect of the younger country would seem to be, by many hundred years, the older of the two.

Perversions abound in the earliest Cant vocabularies, and in many of our recent ones, too. Some of these perversions we may allow were the results of design, but this can hardly explain all of them. The greater part doubtless originated either through the ignorance of the transcriber, printer, or thief. And so we find in Harman's "Caveat," 1573, *askew*, which should be *a skew*, and *morts*, which should be *mots*. In Tufts's "Glossary of Thief Talk," as spoken in the Castle in Boston Harbor, now Fort Independence, 1793–98, we see *glin*, which should be *glim*, a star or light ; *trick*, a watch, which should be *tick ; kin*, which should be *ken*, defined "a stone" instead of "a store," etc. In the next earliest glossary of American Flash Language, used about the beginning of the present century, as the same appears in the dying confession of Thomas Mount, executed at Little Rest, R. I., we find *ken* written correctly, and correctly defined "a house." But as a set-off for this, we have in the Mount vocabulary all of Tufts's absurdities, with the exception of *ken*, just given, with other novelties besides, *e. g., garf*, instead of *gaff ; kinicher*, instead of *kinchen ; sereen*, instead of *screen ; beek*, instead of *beak ; wile*, instead of *vyle*, etc. But perversions of this kind are not confined to the older Cant vocabularies.

In Matsell's "Vocabulum" we have Captain *Topor*, which must be meant for *Toby*, a smart highwayman ; *donnez* for *donner ; poney* for *ponez, parney*, explained "ring" instead of "rain," etc. Such are some of the minor difficulties which an attempt to explain Cant involves.

Thief words consist of only three parts of speech, and all of these in their simplest forms. It has no declensions, no conjugations, no syntax, no grammar. The "Thieves' Grammar," by Captain Alexander Smith, n. d., 1719–20, is no grammar at all. Therefore, if the thief is obliged to have recourse to grammar, — as, for example, in comparison, — he goes to the grammar of his native tongue.

It has been generally assumed that the talk of the thief is composed entirely of his peculiar words which go to make his language utterly incomprehensible. This, however, is not the case, Thief

talk, as well as correspondence, — for the thief can sometimes write, — shows less of this *patter* than might be supposed. The most voluminous of all forms of thief talk is doubtless the *Argot* of France. In specimens we have seen, contained in letters, — and several such have been brought to our notice, — the average of the words would not, we are sure, exceed ten per cent. We doubt whether if the general average of the peculiar words contained in the thief talk of any country would much exceed this. Of course we do not speak of the Rommany which is a regular language.

It was the fashion, when the classics were most in favor, to trace derivations to what were known as the *learned languages*, as if language in general began and ended with these. It would almost seem as if the scholars did not know that in every country, at a time not quite so remote, there did exist an old language from which the modern vernacular might have come. In many recent attempts at derivation we find something similar, only it is in modern instead of ancient tongues that origins are sought. Both Cant and Slang have suffered in this respect. We find words assigned to Gypsy Hebrew, Hindoo, Turkish, etc., to anything and everything, rather than to the English mother-tongue.

In 1566 or 1567, probably in 1567, our first vocabulary of English Cant was published, under the title of " A Caveat or Warening for Common Cursetors, vulgarly called Vagabones, set forth by Thomas Harman, Esquire, for the ptilite and propfyt of his naturall cuntrey."

In his "Epistle to the singular good Lady Elisabeth, Countes of Shrewsbury," — certainly a strange patron for a somewhat peculiar book, — Harman tells us, as far as he could learn from an examination of a number of these " vacabones, their language, which they termed ' peddlers' Frenche or Canting,' began but within these few years or little above."

William Harrison, in his "Description of England," prefixed to Holinshed's Chronicles (1586), writes: "It is not yet full threescore years since this trade began, but how it hath prospered since that time, it is easie to iudge; for they are supposed, of one sex and another, to amount into above 10 000 persons, as I have heard reported. Moreover, in counterfeiting the Egyptian rogues, they have devised a language among themselves, which they term *Canting* (but other pedlers French), — a speach compact thirtie yeares since, of English and a great number of odd words of their owne devising, without all order or reason, and yet such is it as none but themselves are able to understand."

This shows how little was known of this talk, even at that early period.

The " Vocabulum or Rogue's Lexicon," by George W. Matsell,

Special Justice, Chief of Police, etc., (New York, 1859), asserts that the language of the rogue in New York is the language of the rogue the world over. This is not so. Even the Cant of England and America is not one and the same. Many terms to be found in the one do not appear in the other, or else they are entirely changed. In the matter of enumeration they do not agree. And the same differences everywhere exist. The Spanish Gitano and the *Germania* of Spain have only some words in common. The talk of the German Jew rogues and the *Lussnekodesch* (literally holy language — the commercial and business language of the Jew), although the groundwork of both is largely Hebrew, are far from being one and the same dialect. If we go to Farther India, we find precisely the same condition of things : the speech of the land and river thieves of Hindostan are two different and entirely distinct tongues.

Must we offer an apology for these words on thief talk? Here it is. The importance of thief languages will appear more clearly when we turn our attention to the manner of their construction and the elements out of which they were formed. The one shows the mental progress of the men — rude and totally devoid of all education — who made them ; while the other often holds fragments of old languages fallen into oblivion, which it would be in vain to search for elsewhere (see Biondelli, " Origine, diffusione, ed importanza delle lingue furbesche," in his " Studii linguistici," Milan, 1850).

What is the origin of our English Cant?

At the time of the Conquest, under Norman oppression, many of the Saxons became outlaws and thieves. The language of these vagabonds was the language of the conquered, because they knew no other speech, and generation after generation simply continued this, with little or no change. And so, when the first vocabulary of this " unknown tongue, this lousey language, this peuysche speeche," as old Harman calls it, was given to the world, more than five centuries after the Conquest, almost every word of it was Anglo-Saxon. Even now, it is more Anglo-Saxon than our English, — and this is English Cant.

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William Cumming Wilde.

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